

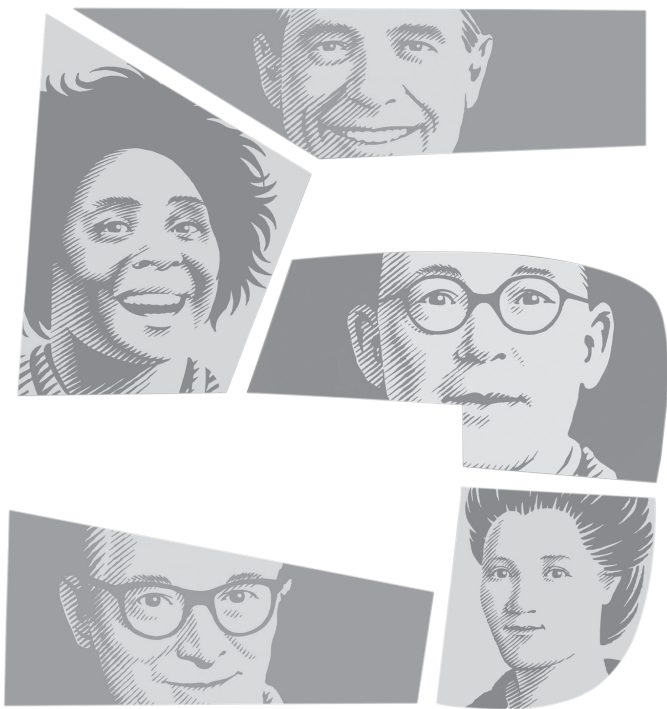


MERE CHRISTIANS

BINGE-WORTHY BIOGRAPHIES THAT SHOW YOU

HOW TO GLORIFY GOD IN YOUR WORK

JORDAN RAYNOR AND KALEIGH COX




MERE CHRISTIANS

JORDAN RAYNOR AND KALEIGH COX



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON



TO THE TRUE AUTHOR OF THESE AND ALL OUR FAVORITE STORIES

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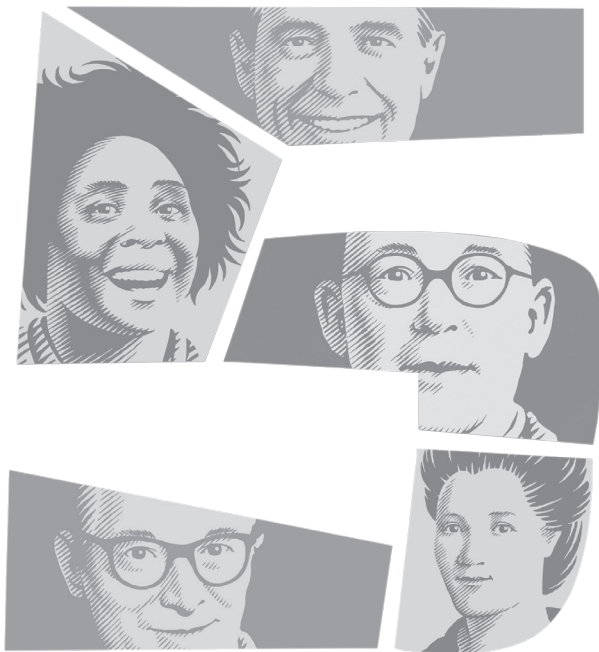
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INTRODUCTION

You're not a pastor, missionary, or religious professional. You're a mere Christian like me (Jordan) who works as an entrepreneur, teacher, or mechanic. And you *deeply* want to glorify God in every aspect of your life—including your work.

But what on earth does that look like *practically*?

How do you embrace your role in the “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9) when you spend more time preparing PowerPoint presentations than you do praying prayers? How can you be “salt and light” (Matthew 5:13-16) in a dark industry without losing your job *or* your saltiness? How do you work at a pace that allows you to “serve” your clients or employer “wholeheartedly” (Ephesians 6:7) while being unhurried enough to experience and extend God’s love throughout your day?

These questions are where the rubber meets the proverbial road, and there are two ways to answer them. I could *tell* you the answers through theological exposition. Or I could *show* you through stories. There is a place for the former. But this book gives you the latter.

LESS TELLING, MORE SHOWING

Pastor Tim Keller once said, “You never learn anything spiritually valuable by being told. You have to be shown.”¹

I think that’s part of the reason “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Because while God knew that you and I needed to be *told* how to glorify him through his living written Word, he also knew that we needed to be *shown* how to glorify him through the lived Word of Jesus Christ. I think God knew that we humans need flesh-and-bone, three-dimensional models to understand what it looks like practically to glorify him.

Of course, we have the perfect model in Jesus Christ. But we *also* have imperfect yet helpful models of how to glorify God in Jesus’s followers. This is why the apostle Paul said, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Paul understood that he had a unique story that would make the idea of following Jesus more concrete to those who shared his work, stage of life, and cultural context. And so he encouraged those believers to look to him as an animated case study on how to glorify God.

Paul’s words point to an important principle: If you want to know what it looks like practically to glorify God, look first to Christ and second to Christ’s followers. And that is exactly what this book is designed to help you do.

In the following pages, I’ll introduce you to five mere Christians whose examples you and I would be wise to follow because of how well they followed the example of Christ—five men and women who will show you how to practically glorify God in your work.

Fred Rogers—the creator of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*—will show you how to glorify God by treating your current job as a “priestly” duty, making time to truly experience the love of God while you work, and living at a pace that allows you to extend that love to others you encounter Monday through Friday.

Fannie Lou Hamer—the civil rights activist who stood up to President Johnson on national TV—will show you how to glorify God by working

for justice without hating the unjust, embracing the tension between trusting in God and hustling at work, and believing that God is creating an impact through your work even when that work appears to be in vain.

Ole Kirk Christiansen—the founder of LEGO—will show you how to glorify God by persevering through life’s most brutal trials, embracing playful work the world calls “useless,” and committing yourself to the highest standards of your craft.

Hannah More—the poet largely credited for abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire—will show you how to glorify God by refusing to isolate from “dark” places, working to change the world through culture and not just politics, and showing an uncommon audacity that can be explained only by a humble confidence in God.

C.S. Lewis—the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Mere Christianity*—will show you how to glorify God by finding your ultimate joy in Christ and not your work, treating everything at work as evangelism, not just your words, and embracing your role as a mere Christian as one of the Church’s most effective means of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

The stories of these five mere Christians each stand on their own. So feel free to pick and choose which ones you will read. But before you crack open the first story, I want to make one thing clear...

THESE ARE NOT YOUR TYPICAL BIOGRAPHIES

If you’re like me, you probably have a love-hate relationship with biographies. Which is why the stories in this book differ from traditional biographies in three significant ways.

1. They are mercifully short.

I’m interested in Winston Churchill. But I’m not interested enough to read the three-*thousand*-page tome that is hailed as the best biography on his life.

I want biographies I can finish in a single sitting, and I’m not interested in reading everything the person ever wrote. I just want the action—the juicy stuff—the most compelling, made-for-TV scenes from somebody’s life that when put together, give me a relatively complete portrait of their life without having to zoom in on every brushstroke.

I’m betting you feel the same way. And that’s what you will find in the

five mercifully short biographies that make up this book, each of which can be read in under an hour.

2. They are extremely entertaining.

Most of C.S. Lewis's biographers agree that Lewis had an affair with his best friend's mom. Scandalous, right? And *super* interesting in light of Lewis's future redemption. But trust me: You would fall asleep reading about this affair in most Lewis biographies because rather than focusing on the story, they spend twenty pages summarizing every letter the alleged lovers ever wrote to each other.

You will *not* find that type of biography in this book. My cowriter Kaleigh Cox and I have set out to write a "can't put it down" version of these mere Christians' stories that are as entertaining as fiction but all entirely true—biographies that are as page-turning as James Patterson's novels and as helpful as Tim Keller's sermons. This brings me to the third and final thing that makes the biographies in this collection different.

3. They are profoundly helpful.

Unlike most biographies where the story is an end in and of itself, the biographies in this book are a means to an end—namely, showing you how to practically glorify God in your own work as a mere Christian today.

To that end, each biography in this book concludes with a section called "Three Ways to Glorify God in Your Work" to help you apply what you saw animated in each story. Although most biographies make their subjects out to be heroes we mortals could never dream of emulating, this collection intentionally does not.

Why? Because the same Holy Spirit that was at work in Rogers, Hamer, Christiansen, More, and Lewis is at work in you today, believer. And so, you and I can glorify God in the same ways these men and women did if we will hear and respond to their stories.

Are you ready to see what it looks like practically to be guided by that same Spirit to glorify God in your work? Good! Then let's begin.



FRED ROGERS

CREATOR OF *MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD*

HOW TO GLORIFY GOD BY EMBRACING YOUR CALLING,
EXPERIENCING YOUR BELOVEDNESS, AND ELIMINATING ALL HURRY

CHAPTER I

If neckties could tell tales, the one Fred Rogers is buried in would tell an epic one.

With a black-and-blue tartan pattern, it was the style traditionally worn by ordained Presbyterian ministers as they preached from the pulpit.

But Fred Rogers was no pastor. He was the host of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, an educational children's show that ran on public television for over thirty years.

Each episode began in much the same way: A traffic light blinking yellow was a subtle reminder to slow down. And then Mr. Rogers himself would enter singing "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" as he removed his suit jacket, zipped up his sweater, and changed his shoes. Throughout the familiar routine, he'd maintain a warm smile and eye contact with the camera.

After the song closed, Fred would talk to his young audience—directly and through puppets—and help them process topics ranging from anger and fear to divorce and death.

Each child watching would feel as if Mister Rogers was talking only to them. But across more than nine hundred episodes, Fred was connecting with millions of children. In the mid-1980s, when the show was at its peak, nearly 10 percent of American households tuned in on a regular basis.

By that point, the show seemed inevitable. But the truth is that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* almost never happened at all.

In 1955, just as his career in television was first taking off, Fred felt conflicted. He enjoyed his work as a writer and cohost of a program called *The Children's Corner*. He loved working with children and was a natural in front of the camera. But according to one biographer, "He couldn't quite give up the idea of service through the church he'd found attractive as a young boy sitting in the pews with his mother."¹

And so he enrolled in Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, located across town from the television station where he worked.

Every weekday for eight years, he arrived at the station early to begin work. He stopped midday to drive thirty blocks to class and then returned to the studio for a live broadcast.

Despite the demands of both his career and his coursework, Fred Rogers excelled at both, graduating magna cum laude with a master of divinity in 1963.

But somewhere in the midst of all those drives back and forth between seminary and the studio, an idea began to form within him.

What if his career and calling weren't opposite trajectories after all? What if he was called not to choose but to combine? To carry the work of ministry onto a television set? To serve a congregation of young children behind puppets rather than pulpits?

The idea was radical. And the elders of the Pittsburgh Presbytery were not on board. They urged Fred to pursue a traditional path of ministry, preaching on Sundays in a church body and ministering to the congregation the rest of the week.

Perhaps "urged" is not the right word. They *commanded* it.

The local presbytery held the power of assignment, and Fred simply would not be assigned to a children's television program. It wasn't done.

But Fred couldn't let the idea go. Fortunately, Fred wasn't alone in his conviction that there is more to Christian ministry than giving sermons and pastoring a congregation. His friend Reverend Bill Barker was teaching part time at the seminary and decided to go before the elders to challenge their decision.

Barker argued on behalf of Fred: "Look, here's an individual who has his pulpit proudly in front of a TV camera. His congregation are little people from the ages of about two or three on up to about seven or eight. And this is a whole congregation of hundreds of thousands if not millions of kids, and this is a man who has been authentically called by the Lord as much as any of you guys sitting out there."²

Barker's plea was a success, and in June 1963, Fred was ordained in front of his family, friends, and fellow ministers. The day was sunny with a pleasant breeze, the service was full of Fred's favorite music, and everyone involved seemed caught up in the joy of this unusual ordination service.

It was Barker who did the honors of formally charging Fred with his official role in ministry: "We charge you to shake us through a God who involves

Himself in our world, into the world where He already is... This world of TV cameras, of puppets, of children, of parents, of studios, of directors, of actors, this [too] is God's world... We, as the Church, charge that you speak to us to disturb us... We charge you to speak to us to remind us that we too, through you, must be involved."³

Not long after that service, Barker went on a trip to Scotland and returned with a gift for his newly ordained friend: a black-and-blue, tartan-patterned tie, which a delighted Fred declared his "clergy tie."

"I like to wear this on [*Neighborhood*] to give a subliminal message," Fred once shared with a conspiratorial smile.⁴ He eventually chose to be buried in the tie—but not until he'd lived a lot of life in it first.

Few people know that the calm, steady Fred Rogers threw away his dream show not once but twice, and with no real plan for what was next. Or that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* would have been canceled before it even really began if not for the protests of thousands of superfan moms. Or that he was so disciplined he weighed in at precisely 143 pounds every single day of his adult life—yet so whimsical he didn't hesitate to throw his head back and laugh at the pranks Michael Keaton orchestrated on set.

The life of Fred Rogers is full of both delightful surprises and invaluable lessons. It's a story of how all Christians—not just pastors and religious professionals—can glorify God in their work. It's a case study of what it looks like to work at the pace of Jesus and experience the love of God amid the busyness of daily life. But above all, it's a story of how pouring your life out in service of others can offer glimpses of heaven on earth.

CHAPTER 2

The kidnapping was called the biggest story “since the Resurrection.”⁵ But when the body of famous aviator Charles Lindbergh’s one-year-old son was found partly buried within five miles of the family home, it was a trial, not a miracle, that followed.

The whole world had watched with bated breath as the frantic family responded to ransom notes via newspaper headlines. So, even after the kidnapper was arrested, wealthy parents like Jim and Nancy Rogers worried their children would be the next target.

There was, after all, a considerable fortune that could be squeezed from the Rogers family. Nancy, whose family had the foresight to be early investors in radio, had brought a sizable inheritance into her marriage.

Everyone in the small working-class town of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, knew the beautiful young couple and celebrated with them when Fred McFeely Rogers was born on March 20, 1928. Their three-story brick home had plenty of room for a growing family, but after a long and difficult labor, Nancy was grieved to hear doctors advise that her first birth also be her last.

Still, the tight-knit community of Latrobe was the perfect place to raise a son. Its welcoming, tree-lined streets and picturesque homes would eventually form the inspiration for the model town that appears in every episode of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. And yet, after the Lindbergh family’s worst nightmare played out in the headlines, not even Latrobe felt safe anymore.

Jim and Nancy held their only son closely and ensured he was under constant supervision. When it was time for Fred to start school, he didn’t ride the bus or walk to class with other children but instead rode in a limousine under the watchful eye of the family’s private driver.

Of course, no matter how much money you have or how many people you

employ, it's impossible to protect your child forever. One day, when school let out earlier than expected, Fred didn't see anyone waiting for him in front of Latrobe Elementary School and began to walk the ten blocks home.

Despite his parents' fears, there were no greedy kidnappers lurking in the shadows. But when you're a shy, overweight young boy often bedridden due to a bad case of asthma, that's not why you're looking over your shoulder anyway.

"It wasn't long before I sensed I was being followed—by a whole group of boys," Fred later recalled. "As I walked faster, I looked around. They called my name and came closer and closer and got louder and louder."⁶

"Freddy! Hey, fat Freddy! We're going to get you, Freddy!"

Their taunts mingled with the pounding sounds of their footsteps and his own rapidly beating heart as he broke into a run.

As he ran, Fred prayed for refuge. *Lord, please let Mrs. Stewart be home, please let Mrs. Stewart be home.* When he fell against her door, panting and knocking, his prayers were answered. The door swung open, and he stepped inside, shaking but safe at last.

The family's driver arrived to pick Fred up a little while later, and it was a changed boy who slid into the limo's back seat. He had, for the first time, felt the tangible, personal love of God for him. It would stick with him for the rest of his life.

Years later, Fred recalled, "The tough times I've been through...turned out to be times in which God's presence was so clear—so real that it felt like Mrs. Stewart opening her door and taking me into her safe home."⁷

But if the moment of rescue changed young Fred, so did the chase itself. "I resented the teasing. I resented the pain. I resented those kids for not seeing beyond my fatness or my shyness," he later shared.⁸

As he processed that resentment, his vulnerable sensitivity took on a new shape. It became empathetic compassion, a trait for which he'd eventually become known the world over.

"[After that day,] I sought out stories of other people who were poor in spirit, and I felt for them," remembered Fred. "I started to look behind the things that people did and said and...after a lot of sadness, I began a lifelong search for what is essential, what it is about my neighbor that doesn't meet the eye."⁹

With this new perspective, Fred began paying closer attention to how his parents moved through a hurting world. In the comfort afforded by wealth,

Jim and Nancy Rogers could have turned a blind eye to the less fortunate and embraced a life of leisure. But they did nothing of the sort.

When Jim walked the floor at his numerous factories around town, it was with a sharp eye for opportunities—not to correct but to connect. He'd ask employees about their lives and families, listening carefully and making mental notes of those in need.

Then, when he got home, he'd report what he'd learned to Nancy, who always sprang into action. Mrs. Rogers organized and led a volunteer ministry composed of several local churches dedicated to meeting needs in the community. Jim and Nancy Rogers, who took seriously God's command to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly, often used their own money to buy what was needed.

Nearly everyone in town had been a beneficiary of the couple's generosity, or at least knew someone who was. After a while, "the school nurse at Latrobe Elementary School would just order shoes, coats, eyeglasses, and even furniture and have the bills sent directly to Nancy Rogers."¹⁰

Each year, Nancy began Christmas shopping in June, buying around 1,500 gifts that she picked out—or knitted—herself.

Her husband had his own methods of radical generosity. When he died, his personal ledger book held the records of thousands of loans he'd quietly given to employees with apparently no effort at collection.

As Fred grew from a young, shy "fat Freddy" to a more thoughtful teenager, he became increasingly convinced of his parents' belief that life is for service. And as he sat by their side in the pews of Latrobe Presbyterian Church on Sunday mornings, he wondered whether a role in ministry might be how he served the world.

But as he was about to discover, committing to his "why" came easily. Discerning his "how" would be much harder.

CHAPTER 3

His dorm was like a scene from *Animal House*, and Fred Rogers could not have felt more out of place.

It would be another decade before Chris Miller, the scriptwriter who based that movie on his own experiences at Dartmouth College, arrived on campus, but the school's party culture was already alive and well when Fred enrolled as a freshman.

Dartmouth was still a men-only school, and Fred's roommates were rowdy football players who partied every weekend. Eventually, Fred became so uncomfortable with their antics that he moved in with his French teacher to escape the wild dormitory.

He'd arrived at Dartmouth in 1946, just as World War II came to an end, full of hope and excitement about all the possibilities ahead. After the teasing he'd endured in childhood, Fred had finally found his place in high school as a serious, confident scholar.

One of his high school classmates, legendary golfer Arnold Palmer, recalled, "[Fred] was a very meticulous student. He didn't run with the guys like I did, and he didn't drink beer. I did. We all did...His interests were music and religion and history and that sort of thing. But a nice guy. We liked each other."¹¹

Fred was well liked, or at least well respected, by many at Latrobe High School. His peers voted him student council president and most likely to succeed, and he graduated salutatorian of his class. His girlfriend stood beside him at graduation as class valedictorian.

After finding his footing in high school, he was frustrated to find himself back on shaky social ground at Dartmouth. The quiet, studious Fred turned to music to cope with the isolation—a lifelong habit that was developing into a real passion.

After two years, Fred approached a favorite professor with an idea. He wanted to change his major from Romance languages to music—but Dartmouth did not yet have a developed music department. The professor, who had recently come to Dartmouth from Rollins College in Florida, recommended Fred check out their program instead.

From the moment his plane touched down at the airport in Florida to visit Rollins, Fred's experience diverged drastically from the loneliness he'd endured in his freshman and sophomore years at Dartmouth. A group of young music majors were waiting to greet him with warm smiles and a tour of the school. Among them was Joanne Byrd, Fred's future wife.

"We piled into the antique Franklin that had lots of room. We were hanging out the windows of the car when he came out," recalled Joanne years later. "We grabbed him, and took him right with us, and made him one of us. He blended in so well."¹²

Transferring from an Ivy League school to a smaller, little-known college in Winter Park, Florida, would be, by the world's standards, a step down. But Fred sensed that for him, this was a step in the right direction.

Surrounded by new friends, Fred continued to take his work seriously but also felt the freedom to relax. One friend and classmate recalled that whenever Fred would pass a marble plaque on campus engraved with the phrase "Life Is for Service," he would flash a mischievous smile and cover "ser" so that it would read "Life Is for vice" instead.

While the sign provided Fred with an opportunity to evoke grins from his friends, it was also a constant reminder of his vision for his own life. He would eventually hang a photo of that sign in his office, a continued daily reminder that "life is for service" even as that life took him far beyond the Rollins campus.

But well into his four years of undergraduate studies, that future was still unclear. Fred was at a loss for how exactly he would serve God and others through his career.

In high school, he'd considered becoming a Presbyterian minister or an airline pilot. In college, Fred "drove his parents crazy, because every year he had a different idea about what he was going to do. He was going to be a diplomat, then he was going to be a French teacher, then he was going to run an orphanage, then he was going to be a musician."¹³

While the constant changing of plans may have seemed chaotic to his parents, Fred was patiently exploring all his options. Years later, when enrolled in seminary, he would meet Professor Bill Orr, a mentor who would give Fred the words that explained his approach to vocation. He called it a “guided drift.”

What may have seemed like aimless drifting to others was actually guided by the Holy Spirit and Fred’s longstanding commitment to living a life of service.

“The drift was allowing oneself the creative freedom to follow not just your interests, but where life would lead you...allowing the opportunities that come along to spark your creativity and allowing yourself the freedom to go after them,” explained Fred’s biographer Max King. “Yet everything was based on his strong [Christian] values and his strong commitment to excellence.”¹⁴

Jim Rogers held out hope that his son would “drift” right back to Latrobe to work alongside him in the family’s businesses. But as Fred’s college graduation date drew near, he seemed to have finally made up his mind. He was accepted to Western Theological Seminary, where he could pursue his childhood dream of becoming a Presbyterian minister.

But then, during a visit home over Easter break during his senior year, Fred discovered something in his parents’ living room that would shock him and change the course of his life forever.

CHAPTER 4

You know, I don't think I'll go into seminary right away."

With graduation just nine weeks away, Fred was reporting yet another change of heart to his parents. "I think maybe I'll go into television," he said.¹⁵

It was quite an announcement coming from someone who had just that week seen a television for the first time. Jim and Nancy Rogers had only recently purchased one of the first TV sets in town.

"I went home my senior year for a vacation in Latrobe, and I saw this new thing called television," Fred would later recall. "And I saw people dressed in some kind of costumes, literally throwing pies in each other's faces."

The cheap attempt at humor "astounded" Fred, who found the behavior degrading and inappropriate for young viewers. "This could be a wonderful tool for education. Why is it being used this way?" he wondered.¹⁶

His decision to pivot into television may have been abrupt, but it wasn't random. In fact, it was the culmination of many interests—particularly in education and music.

But it would be over a decade before Fred came to understand that he'd stumbled upon his calling in his parents' living room that day.

"I'll never forget the sense of wholeness I felt when I finally realized what I was—songwriter, telecommunicator, student of human development, language buff—but that all those things and more could be used in the service of children's healthy growing," he'd later explain to a group of new college graduates.

"The directions weren't written in invisible ink on the back of my diploma. They came ever so slowly for me; and ever so firmly I trusted that they would emerge. All I can say is, it's worth the struggle to discover who you really are."¹⁷

Fred's willingness to consider a wide variety of career paths as opportunities

to serve God and others was remarkable—and his parents' support of that exploration even more so.

Not far from Latrobe, future actor Jimmy Stewart was also growing up in a Christian household. He had a “tough, demanding father” whose “sense of Presbyterian propriety led him to relentlessly pressure Jimmy to leave the profession of acting, which he did not consider a proper, Christian calling.”¹⁸

Jim Rogers, on the other hand, gave Fred his full support. Even though he didn't fully understand his son's vision, he used his connections to help Fred land his first job after graduation: an entry-level position at NBC.

As an assistant, Fred's job was to fetch “coffee and Cokes” for people who often ignored or dismissed him. In an interview years later, Fred endeared himself to anyone who's ever had a bad internship when he recalled a time “he brought coffee to someone...who took one sip and said curtly, ‘I wanted milk and not sugar.’”¹⁹

But as he took drink orders and ran errands, Fred was also watching the pioneers of modern television shape the future of the entertainment industry. His bosses included Sylvester “Pat” Weaver, creator of *The Today Show*, and Kirk Browning, whose many accolades included four Emmy Awards and a Peabody Award.

With a foot in the door at NBC, Fred's career path was full of possibility. His personal life, on the other hand, remained a bit hazy—particularly where Joanne Byrd was concerned.

After developing a close friendship in college, Fred and Joanne had kept in touch beyond graduation. But with a thousand miles between them—Joanne was in graduate school at Florida State—both were casually seeing other people.

And then Fred's parents intervened.

It was on Jim and Nancy Rogers's annual winter vacation to Florida that Joanne stopped by for a visit with her friend Cristophe in tow. Although warm and friendly, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers kept a sharp eye on the pair. And once the visit was over, they wasted no time in giving Fred a call.

Whatever they said or did is a mystery, but it seems to have served as a moment of epiphany for Fred. A few days later, he wrote to Joanne, asking for her hand in marriage. And then he waited—until, at last, the phone rang at his apartment.

“Hello?” Fred answered. After a brief but loaded pause, he heard one word from the other end: “Sh*t.”

Joanne, full of nerves, had blanked on what to say and blurted out the word of graffiti she’d been staring at in the phone booth. The two shared a nervous laugh before Joanne finally found the word she’d been looking for: “Yes.”

After an elegant wedding on June 9, 1952, and a honeymoon in Europe, the newlyweds made their home in New York, where Fred was quickly climbing the ladder at NBC. Higher-ups at the network were even considering him as a potential host of an upcoming variety show when another call from his parents changed the course of his life once again.

Pittsburgh was launching a new TV station called WQED, Jim told Fred. Wouldn’t he like to move home and be on the ground floor of the network?

When his mentor and friends at NBC learned Fred was taking his father’s suggestion seriously, they were shocked. “They said, ‘You are nuts. That place isn’t even on the air yet, and you’re in line to be a producer or a director or anything you want to be here,’” Fred later recalled.²⁰

But to Fred, the opportunity to pivot into educational television felt like “the right place at the very right time...It gave me a chance to use all the talents that I had ever been given.”²¹ At WQED, he hoped he might even have the freedom to shape a program of his own.

“I’d love to have guests and present a whole smorgasbord of ways for the children to choose,” he’d say later, recounting his early idea for a show. “Some child might choose painting; some child might choose playing the cello. There are so many ways of saying who we are and how we feel. Ways that don’t hurt anybody. And it seems to me that this is a great gift.”²²

But Fred wasn’t quite done learning that having a vision is just the first step. Achieving it is another matter entirely.

CHAPTER 5

When Dorothy Daniel purchased a small tiger hand puppet in March 1954, she never could have imagined the cultural phenomenon she was setting into motion.

As the general manager of WQED, she was simply preparing for a celebratory staff dinner the night before the station's new show, *The Children's Corner*, was scheduled to go on air. She wanted to show her appreciation for the staff by placing a small, handpicked gift at each person's place at the table.

As she worked her way down the list, she came to Fred Rogers. She'd never seen him perform with puppets, but she'd heard he liked using them when engaging with children. So, when Fred arrived for dinner on March 31, he found a small tiger puppet waiting for him.

Delighted by the thoughtful gift, Fred named the little tiger after its giver. And the very next day, Daniel Striped Tiger made his debut on set. At the start of the show, he popped out of a hole in a clock with the time and a fact for the show's host: "Hi, Josie. It's 5:02, and Columbus discovered America in 1492!"

"That was the first thing that he said, and I had no idea that he'd say any more," Fred later recalled.²³

But an hour a day was a lot of programming to fill, and the weekly budget of \$150 for *The Children's Corner* barely covered salaries for the show's hosts, Fred Rogers and Josie Carey. Daniel Tiger was soon making regular appearances to chat with Josie and fill air time cheaply.

"When [Dorothy] Daniel asked who wants to do a children's program, Josie and I said, 'We'll do it for an hour a day,'" Fred would later explain. "Can you imagine producing an hour a day? I combed the country for free films we could put in... We had things like how to grow grass in New Hampshire. No one had any idea how hard it would be to fill an hour of programming a day."²⁴

But even watching grass grow was, by Fred's estimation, a serious improvement upon the pie-in-the-face, slapstick humor so common to other children's programs. It was, after all, that appalling behavior that had inspired him to create something better in the first place.

But now that he had a platform, it wasn't entirely clear what that something better should be.

Eventually, Fred would be known for meticulously planning his programs, but in the early days of *The Children's Corner*, he and Josie would simply jot down some ideas on a single page from a yellow legal pad and then improvise on air.

Josie Carey was the host and face of the show, while Fred, aside from a couple of small on-screen appearances, mostly hid behind his puppets and piano. The formula was simple, thoughtful, and before long, wildly successful—so successful that NBC wanted to put a version of *The Children's Corner* on national television.

Despite the potential to reach more children on a bigger stage, Fred was wary. He was unwilling to walk away from the WQED program. Plus, he and Joanne now had two young sons, so he didn't love the idea of being away from home every week to film on set in New York. Most critically, Fred knew from his years at NBC that a commercial station had fundamentally different goals than those he was pursuing through public educational television.

But eventually, Fred agreed to give it a shot—with some strict stipulations. They could do a once-a-week program, and they'd have to film on Saturdays. He insisted on flying in and out on the same day to avoid missing seminary classes during the week or church with his family on Sundays.

When NBC agreed to his terms, filming began. Once again, the show took off. According to Josie's recollection, "They immediately broke the record for fan mail for a children's program on any station."²⁵

But Fred's initial misgivings soon proved true. NBC was eager to capitalize on the success with show-inspired toys and children-focused ads during the program. Fred, vehemently opposed to any marketing aimed at children, dug in his heels.

When higher-ups at the station realized they would never change his mind, they pulled the show after just thirty-nine weeks. Fred was content. Josie was dismayed.

Back in Pittsburgh, tensions mounted between the pair as they continued to cohost the daily version of *Corner*. Josie, an entertainer at heart, had always enjoyed the unscripted and spontaneous nature of their show. But Fred was first and foremost an educator, and he was becoming increasingly adamant about planning every detail of the program.

“It got so that Fred started to worry about wording,” said Josie. “You never fight with Fred. But once we had a twenty-minute discussion about whether to use the word would, should, or could.”²⁶

And then there was the baby-in-the-glove-compartment incident.

On a comedy show on Pittsburgh’s commercial station, KDKA, Josie participated in a skit about a mother who had misplaced her baby. “Oh, where was the last place you saw it?” Josie asked in the sketch. “I think it’s in the glove compartment of a car that was headed to Cleveland,” quipped the other actor.²⁷

Josie considered it nothing more than a harmless joke. Fred considered it cruel.

“Do you realize,” he asked her, “that it’s one of the worst things you can tell a child? A child is so afraid of being left or lost, and it’s such an enclosed place, the glove compartment. That child is going to feel that he’s being put into a small place—that he’s lost his parents.”

Josie tried to defend herself: “I said, ‘Hey, it’s a joke. It’s a silly program. The kids know it’s silly.’ [But] Fred thought it was just horrible.”²⁸

Fred viewed Josie as a close friend, but he was beginning to think their philosophical differences were simply too great to overcome. In 1961, after eight years of working on the show, Fred walked away from *The Children’s Corner*, claiming he wanted more time to focus on his studies at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

But years later, his wife Joanne would reveal the real reason for his decision. Fred felt he could “fashion a much better program for young children” and that “his work with Josie Carey, as popular and successful as it had been, wasn’t the right road to his future.”²⁹

His instincts were right. Two years later, Fred Rogers would be a seminary graduate, an ordained minister, and a huge national celebrity—in Canada.

CHAPTER 6

I want you to be on camera.”

Fred Rogers had just arrived in Toronto when Fred Rainsberry, the head of children’s programming for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, made the unexpected demand.

“Oh...” stalled Fred. “I thought you wanted me to come and do puppets and music, which is what I’ve always done.”

“No, you can do that too,” said Rainsberry with a wave of his hand. “But I want you to look into the lens and just pretend that’s a child, and we’ll just call it *Misterogers*. Let’s just do that.”³⁰

It wasn’t what Fred had in mind when he accepted the invitation to create his own program in Canada, but he didn’t argue. At least he would finally have a budget to create the show he wanted.

It seems the idea to play some sort of fictional on-air character for the show never occurred to Fred. “He just couldn’t be anything but himself,” recalled one coworker fondly. And it was immediately apparent that Fred, as himself, “managed [being on camera] very, very comfortably and easily...He was so focused on doing the right thing by his audience that he wasn’t anxious.”³¹

And when the cameras cut off, that genuine concern for his young viewers didn’t. After dinner and bedtime with the boys, he and Joanne would often sit together at the kitchen table, reading and responding to fans’ letters. He refused to outsource even this basic act of kindness.

Day after day, Fred wrote and filmed episodes of *Misterogers*. Night after night, he answered letters. And month after month, the show continued to grow. Before he knew it, four years had passed, and the Rogers family faced a big decision: Their Canadian visas were set to expire. Were they ready to make the move permanent?

Fred had finally created a wildly successful show on a network that understood his vision for serving children, but he was acutely attuned to the needs of the little people in his own home too. He knew his family was homesick for Pittsburgh. Asking them to become Canadian citizens for his sake felt unfair.

And so, after four wonderful years, Fred walked away from his dream job. There is no record of hesitation on his part. He may have thought the proven success of *Misterogers* in Canada would make it easier to find a place for a similar show in the US. But those hopes were quickly dashed.

Back in Pittsburgh, the leadership at his home station of WQED said they didn't have the funding for him to bring a version of *Misterogers* to the States. They promised to let him know if anything changed.

Fred held out hope for a phone call with good news, but the weeks stretched on, and he soon felt adrift. He started volunteering at Bellefield Presbyterian Church, using Daniel Tiger and his other puppets to teach preschool classes just so he could keep engaging with young children.

After a while, his parents began to worry. It's easy to imagine that secretly, Fred did too. Were his best career days now behind him, back in Toronto? If he couldn't find funding soon, how would he live out his ordained calling and work for "the broadcasting of grace throughout the land"?³²

But then that train of thought sparked an idea—or, rather, a memory from his ordination ceremony. "We, as the Church...charge you to speak to us to remind us that we too, through you, must be involved," Bill Barker had said.³³

What better time than now to do exactly that? Invigorated by the idea that the Church could be his partner in television ministry, Fred wrote an impassioned plea to the Presbytery board.

He began with some observations about the amount of time young children—"children whom the Church has never been able to reach!"—spend watching television. They're "being fed slick, stimulating, sound-tracked trash 1,000 hours a year while our Church schools try to teach the opposite with posters, crayons, and paste in one-tenth the time," he argued.

"We must know that we are failing our children," he went on. "But either we won't let ourselves admit it, or we think that there's nothing we as the Church can do about it."

Building to a crescendo, he laid out his request: "There IS something we

can do!...Let's find the money to produce and promote long-range excellence in children's television. What a magnificent ministry it really can be!"³⁴

The letter was incredibly moving—and yet the board remained unmoved. Ceremoniously ordaining Fred for ministry on television was one thing. Funding it was another thing entirely. With the Presbytery's rejection, Fred was back at square one.

Then, finally, his manager called with some good news: He'd scraped together enough support to fund the launch of a fifteen-minute show called *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, to air on WQED and other public television stations across the country. The money wouldn't last long, but it was enough to get started.

Fred, confident that the network would finance more episodes once the show was underway, got to work. But once again, he was wrong. Within one year, funding for the program ran out.

That would've been the end of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and quite possibly Fred's career if not for one fiercely dedicated group: moms.

After just one year of watching *Neighborhood*, children across America had formed a special bond with Mister Rogers. "I remember sitting with a little boy who actually broke down in tears [at the news of the cancellation]," one staff member recalled.³⁵ That boy's mom and the mothers of thousands of other children wouldn't let *Neighborhood* be canceled without a fight.

First, letters of complaint poured in. Then, rallies and protests popped up at educational television stations from coast to coast. Moms in Boston went door-to-door raising money for the show. In Los Angeles, ten thousand superfans showed up at the local TV station for a chance to meet their favorite television neighbor, causing traffic jams as the line to meet Fred stretched across town.

Fred moved through the crowds like a modern-day Jesus in a cardigan—comfortable in the fray and unmoved by the frenzied concerns of staff members as he knelt down to connect with each child.

Finally, the massive swells of support caught the eyes of leaders at the Sears-Roebuck Foundation. They had been looking for a way to align the Sears brand with high-quality children's programming, and given the public outcry for more Mister Rogers, they were confident they had found their man.

After a few calls and some brief negotiations, an announcement was made.

Mister Rogers was coming back to the small screen, this time with a full thirty-minute program called *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* that would be broadcast across the United States.

The news came not a moment too soon. Even as the mothers rejoiced, they had no idea just how important Fred would soon become in helping their children cope with world events. The nation was about to enter one of the most chaotic years in American history.

CHAPTER 7

Fred Rogers, glancing over at his friend in the church pew beside him, was shocked. The pastor in the pulpit, a man in his eighties, had just wrapped up what Fred called “the most poorly crafted sermon I had ever heard in my life.”

And yet, there was his friend, wiping tears from her eyes. “He said exactly what I needed to hear,” she whispered.

That terrible sermon? Exactly what she needed to hear? Fred thought in disbelief.

Later, he realized, “The Holy Spirit was able to translate the words of that feeble sermon to speak to the need of my friend... That experience changed my life. Ever since, I’ve been able to recognize that the space between someone who is offering the best he can and someone who is in need is Holy Ground.”³⁶

That included, in Fred’s opinion, the space between the television set and each viewer. Humbled by that Sunday morning experience, Fred began to pray that the Holy Spirit might take his own feeble attempts and use them for the glory of God and the good of others.

Of course, Fred wasn’t delivering sermons over public television. He couldn’t even speak about his faith explicitly. But that didn’t matter. “You can be an agent of what’s good and not be terribly direct about it,” reasoned Fred.³⁷

And in 1968, the world needed whatever good it could find.

As young soldiers waged war in Vietnam, protesters in the United States took to the streets to wage war on war itself. At the same time, young lives were being lost in the country’s other ongoing battle, the fight for the civil rights of Black Americans. The demand for justice and the backlash from white supremacists was reaching a fever pitch, especially in the weeks surrounding the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The country was riddled with hate, fear, and racial division—qualities that

had no place in the kingdom of God or, as far as Fred was concerned, in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

In his very first week of episodes on the new, fully funded program, Fred invited a Black teacher and an interracial group of young students into his home, sending a clear message that all were welcome in his neighborhood.

Then, Fred took that message a step further, pushing back against segregation laws that prohibited Black Americans from swimming in public pools.

"He invited me to come over and to rest my feet in the water with him," explained actor François Clemmons. As Officer Clemmons, he was the first Black man with a recurring role in a children's television series. "The icon Fred Rogers not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet."³⁸

In the episode, the camera parks on a close-up shot of the men's feet side by side in the kiddie pool before Fred shares his towel with his friend. "Sometimes, just a minute like this will really make a difference," says Fred, gently splashing his feet.³⁹

If viewers are reminded of another Teacher famously washing the feet of his friends, it's not an accident.

"What a tough job to try to communicate the gift of Jesus Christ to anybody. It can't be simply talked about, can it?" Fred asked in a letter to a friend. "Jesus himself used parables—so I guess that's our directive: try to show the kingdom of God through stories as much as possible."⁴⁰

Though he often agonized over seemingly small choices, desperate to get his message precisely right, Fred also knew that only the Holy Spirit could take that message and translate it into what the viewer most needed to see or hear.

"When I walk in that studio door each day, I say, 'Dear God, let some word that is heard be Yours,'" explained Fred. "I always pray that through whatever we produce (whatever we say and do) some word that is heard might ultimately be God's word. That's my main concern."⁴¹

"So the show is like your church?" asked a journalist.

It wasn't a church, Fred replied, so much as "an atmosphere that allows people to be comfortable enough to be who they are...If people are comfortable in that atmosphere, they can grow from there in their own way. A lot of this—all of this—is just tending soil."⁴²

And as Fred was tending the soil, God was clearly “[giving] the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:7, ESV).

Take the story of a young boy whose “parents wouldn’t even give him a winter blanket and wouldn’t give him a bed to sleep in.” As Fred shared with a reporter, the boy “found the *Neighborhood* and watched that program as he was growing up. He said that it gave him hope. He never knew that there were such kind people until he tuned into the *Neighborhood*.”⁴³ But once he did, he found the courage to call an abuse hotline. His parents were sent to jail, and he was ultimately adopted.

Or think, perhaps, of the young mother who thanked Fred for saving her life. Overwhelmed by exhaustion and untreated postpartum depression, she was stopped at an intersection when she had an idea: It would be so easy to drift into the path of oncoming traffic and end her suffering.

But then, from the back seat, her sixteen-month-old began to sing, “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood...” The song was a pinpoint of light in the darkness. Her foot returned safely to the brake, and when she got home, she finally reached out for the help she needed.

“How could a simple program like ours do all this?” Fred asked in awe after hearing these stories and many more like them. “But again, the Holy Spirit can use anything.”⁴⁴

After seven years of “tending soil” on *Neighborhood*, Fred was beginning to see the fruit of his labor, both spiritually and professionally. His was now the most popular show on PBS, and he had the creative freedom, life-changing impact, and vehicle for service of which he’d always dreamed.

No one ever suspected that he was about to throw it all away.

CHAPTER 8

It wouldn't be fair to call it a midlife crisis. Fred wasn't numbing existential dread with a new convertible or illicit affair. But his announcement sent out shockwaves all the same.

In 1975, after producing 455 episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in just seven years, Fred announced he was quitting the show to try something new. He wanted to produce television for adults.

Perhaps he thought he'd make a greater impact speaking to children's caregivers directly. Perhaps he was simply bored. "I'm not sure Fred really knew why he was doing [it]," admitted one coworker.⁴⁵

But as he conducted interviews with politicians, artists, athletes, and psychologists for his new program, one thing became clear very quickly: This was not going to work. The gentleness, patience, and intentionality that made Fred a hero among children felt stilted and awkward to adult audiences more accustomed to fast-paced television.

He tried various formats and specials, but after four years with no real traction, Fred was ready to call it quits.

Then, a little boy jumped from a building.

"In the newspaper, I came across this little blurb that a child had jumped off a roof with a towel," recalled David Newell ("Mr. McFeely"), who read the story to Fred in the back of a taxi.⁴⁶ The child, convinced he could fly after watching Superman on TV, was hospitalized with his injuries.

Fred was appalled, filled with righteous anger at what he considered an egregious abuse of the very medium he felt called to redeem. By the time the cab ride was over, so was his retirement from children's television.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood relaunched at the start of 1980. Still heartbroken by the little boy who believed he was Superman, Fred dedicated his first

week back to showing the fictional nature of superhero movies. But he quickly moved on to topics most adults shied away from discussing with young children—topics like adoption, divorce, and death.

“Some things I don’t understand,” he’d tell his young viewers, but “whatever is mentionable can be more manageable.”⁴⁷

Fred had always believed life is for service, and now he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his children’s program was his avenue for service. With renewed energy and commitment, Fred began to build a routine that would allow him to keep up with the demands of his calling for the next couple of decades.

Every day, Fred woke up between 4:30 and 5:30 in the morning to read his Bible and pray. He’d reference his schedule, praying for each person he expected to encounter that day, and then continue with thanking God for each name on his prayer list.

It was a long list, and his prayers often continued as he left home for the Pittsburgh Athletic Association, where he’d go for his morning swim. If anyone was standing near the water, they might have heard his quiet song of praise, “Jubilate Deo, jubilate Deo, alleluia” (Rejoice in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord, alleluia), right before he dove in.⁴⁸

After swimming laps for forty-five minutes, Fred would shower and pause at the scale before heading to work. Remarkably, that scale read the exact same number every day of Fred’s adult life: 143 pounds.

Then he’d head to WQED, greet the crew around 8:30, and go into makeup at 9:30. There, his ophthalmologist or her assistant would be waiting to put in his contact lenses. (At the end of the day, they’d also help remove them. Fred hated the process and was never comfortable touching his own eye.)

Taping would run from 10:00 to 4:30, with a break for lunchtime, at which point Fred would slip away to read his mail or meditate in the quiet of his office.

Some days, his son Jim recalled, if filming took a little longer, it “would be hectic in the evening because [Fred] was rushing home from work, in order to sit down with us for dinner” by 6:00. But when Fred made it home by 5:00, he “took a nap. We were told, ‘You don’t have to take a nap; it’s not nap time, it’s just quiet time. You can do whatever you want, but you do it quietly.’”⁴⁹

After spending the evening with his family, Fred was in bed and asleep by 9:30 each night, always ensuring he had enough time for seven to eight

uninterrupted hours of rest. Even his email address—zzz143@aol.com—was a nod to his love of sleep.

The next morning, he'd wake up and begin again. "There wasn't a spontaneous bone in that man's body," recalled one member of the *Neighborhood* staff.⁵⁰

Despite his fairly regimented schedule, Fred was never hurried. Those who worked with him were often pleasantly surprised by how relaxed he was.

Michael Keaton, for example, was delighted when he discovered Fred's "sneaky, sly, great sense of humor."⁵¹ Before he was a famous actor in his own right, Keaton worked as a stagehand at WQED where he once hid on set behind the "Picture-Picture" movie wall during filming.

When Fred moved to insert a video, the slot snapped open and a booming voice called out: "I will hear your confession now, son." Rogers joined the whole crew in laughing hysterically at the interruption, adding it to a list of Keaton's pranks that Rogers would recount with a smile for years to come.

Even though he was extremely disciplined in his work, Fred always had time to offer a smile or, even more often, a listening ear. His coworkers and friends noticed the way "everything decompressed and slowed down" when they were with him. They called it "Fred time."⁵²

"Relationships are more important than anything else and [Fred] understood that if you're rushing around from one thing to another, you will invest nothing in the relationship," explained one of Fred's collaborators.⁵³

Dan Fales, executive producer for WQED, once recalled experiencing that otherworldly "Fred time" on an elevator. Overwhelmed by production crises and phones ringing off the hook, he was impatiently stabbing at the elevator buttons when Fred got on.

Seeing the stress on Dan's face, Fred hit the elevator's stop button to offer some quiet encouragement: "Dan, remember what is important—your wonderful family, your sense of joy, and that wit that we all like. I hear that you work things out very well."⁵⁴

That quiet moment made all the difference in Dan's day. Being with Fred usually did.

But you didn't have to be in an elevator with Fred to experience the love of God within him. As one little girl was about to discover, that love could be felt through a TV signal. And it might even work miracles right on your living room floor.

CHAPTER 9

As Kathy Usher watched her daughter Beth walk into class on the first day of school, she—like all moms—was hoping her child would thrive in kindergarten. A few weeks later, she was just hoping Beth would survive.

The nightmare began on the playground where, after falling off the seesaw, Beth had her first seizure. A few days later, she had her second. And then her third. By the time they got a diagnosis—a “one-in-ten-million brain disease”—Beth was suffering through a hundred seizures a day.⁵⁵

“The only way my mom could shower and dress for work without worrying was to prop me up with soft pillows and place me in front of the television,” recalled Beth. “She usually turned on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, and for the length of the show I never had a single seizure.”⁵⁶

Every single weekday for two years, Fred’s program brought a miraculous thirty-minute reprieve from Beth’s unremitting suffering.

So when doctors said a bright young surgeon, Dr. Ben Carson, would need to perform a high-risk surgery to remove half of Beth’s brain, Kathy called WQED to request a signed photo of Mister Rogers for her daughter.

When the secretary approached Fred with a photo to sign, he insisted she call Kathy back right away. “Will you be home this evening at 7:00? Fred would like to call and speak with Beth,” the secretary told Kathy.⁵⁷

And right on time, he did.

“I took the phone from my mother and said hello,” Beth recalled. “I heard a familiar voice and felt immediately at ease.” For nearly an hour, Beth sat in her family’s kitchen and talked to Fred about everything from her fear of dying to her longing for friends.

Around the corner, her parents hovered quietly in the hallway, listening in as tears streamed down their faces.

“I love you, Mister Rogers,” Beth said as the call came to a close.⁵⁸

Shortly after Beth’s twelve-hour surgery, Fred called again. “How is she doing?” he wanted to know. The surgery itself had gone fine, explained Kathy, but Beth had since slipped into a coma. A worried Fred called every day for two weeks before finally asking if he could fly out to visit them in Baltimore. When Kathy agreed, he immediately bought a ticket and arrived the very next day.

With Beth still in a coma, Fred put on a private puppet show and prayed for her; then he slipped away, leaving behind his puppets as a special gift for Beth to awaken to—which she did, a few weeks later.

“Praise God,” breathed Fred with relief when Kathy called with the news.

Throughout the ordeal and the lifelong friendship with Beth that followed, very few people even knew it had happened. Fred was diligent in his efforts to keep the story from the press.

In fact, almost all the stories of Fred’s incredible compassion—and there are so very many—took place off-screen.

There was the time when Fred looked out the window and saw a man who had just been mugged limping away on the New York City street below. Fred rushed downstairs to hand the man a hundred-dollar bill. “I just want you to know that somebody in this world loves you,” said Fred.⁵⁹

Or the time he showed up at his coworker’s front door unexpectedly. “I was praying, and I felt you needed some help,” he told Lisa Hamilton. He had no idea she had become a widow that very morning.

“I was really panicky,” she said of the morning she awoke, still holding her husband’s hand, to discover he had lost his battle with cancer during the night. But then, Fred appeared out of nowhere. “Fred Rogers is the person who called the funeral home, and he wept with me over [my husband’s] body—the only person I remember weeping with me.”⁶⁰

Fred was never one to shy away from people’s pain or avoid what others might consider an uncomfortable interaction. Sometimes, the results were downright miraculous.

Fred’s secretary once watched as he knelt down to connect with a twelve-year-old boy with autism whose family had never heard him speak. Fred “had the King and Queen puppets on his hands, and...the child started speaking in full sentences to the King and Queen,” she explained. “The father started blubbing to the point where he could no longer hold the camera.”⁶¹

Most of Fred's young friends never appeared on *Neighborhood*, but there were some memorable exceptions.

Jeff Erlanger was five years old when he first met Mister Rogers. Confined to a wheelchair, he was getting ready to undergo a major surgery to fuse his spine when his parents wrote to Fred, asking if he'd be willing to meet their son. He did—off camera and under the radar as he had with so many other children.

But a few years later, when Fred wanted to have a child in a wheelchair on an episode of *Neighborhood*, he remembered Jeff's incredible maturity and asked his staff to call the Erlangers.

In the episode, it's easy to see why Fred wanted his viewers to meet this particular young boy. With a matter-of-fact tone and a smile, Jeff talks about the tumor that made him a quadriplegic and the wheelchair he's had since he was four.

Then, the two launch into an impromptu duet of Fred's song "It's You I Like."

"It's you I like, the way you are right now, the way down deep inside you, not the things that hide you—not your fancy chair," they improvise with a shared laugh. "That's just beside you, but it's you I like, every part of you."⁶²

Twenty years later, in 1999, the pair crossed paths once more. Fred was decked out in a tux, about to be inducted into the Television Hall of Fame, when Jeff rolled onto the stage. Fred, unable to contain his joy, leaped from his seat to join him.

"I'm so happy to see you! Thank you for coming—what a surprise!" said Fred, leaning over to embrace his friend.⁶³

When the rapturous applause finally ceased, Jeff looked at Fred and said, "You know, when you tell people that 'it's you I like,' we know that you really mean it. And today, I want to let you know, on behalf of millions of children and grown-ups, that it's you I like."⁶⁴

The tears on the faces of everyone in the room said more about Fred than the award itself ever could.

Two years later, Fred would retire from television. Millions of children would sit down to watch the last episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* on August 30, 2001. At almost the exact same time, terrorists were purchasing tickets for four transcontinental flights they planned to hijack. Fred's work wasn't done quite yet.

CHAPTER 10

On October 23, 2001, Fred Rogers sat down at the piano and turned to face the camera as he had so many times before. But when the recording light began blinking red, his usual warm smile was nowhere to be seen.

It had been over a month since hijackers crashed planes in both New York and Pennsylvania, the two states Fred called home for most of his life. But he still looked dazed and confused.

“Fred, what’s wrong?” asked producer Marge Whitmer. “I just don’t know what good these are going to do,” Fred admitted, tears filling his eyes.

“When the horror of 9/11 really hit him, I think it was a real eye-opener,” explained Whitmer later. “He was realizing it was just so big. It’s always going to be an ongoing struggle to overcome evil.”⁶⁵

As God would have it, Fred’s thirty-three-year career on *Neighborhood* was bookended by two of the most difficult years in American history. His first episode premiered amid the chaos of 1968, a year in which he pushed back against racism and helped young children voice their questions about the assassination of public figures.

Now, more than nine hundred episodes later, he was coming out of his short-lived retirement to help those once-small viewers—all grown up now with children of their own—shepherd the next generation in the aftermath of the deadliest terrorist attack on US soil.

“No matter what our particular job, especially in our world today, we all are called to be ‘tikkun olam,’ repairers of creation,” he told viewers. “Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbor and to yourself.”⁶⁶

It was reminiscent of a message he often gave in times of tragedy: “When I was a little boy and something bad happened in the news, my mother would

tell me to look for the helpers. ‘You’ll always find people helping,’ she’d say. And I’ve found that that’s true. In fact, it’s one of the best things about our wonderful world.”⁶⁷

After recording the series of post-9/11 messages, Fred paused to play a soft tune on the piano, the chords a mix of melancholy and hope, before stepping away from the studio for good.

That’s not to say Fred was done working. Even in “retirement,” he held on to the belief that life is for service. When he wasn’t traveling around the country for speaking engagements, he was working with fifteen employees to develop a children’s media center at Saint Vincent College in his hometown of Latrobe, where he hoped to spend his final years developing educational programs for modern families.

But it was not meant to be. This work—and his legacy—would have to be carried on by those who came after him.

In October 2002, just weeks after his final 9/11 video aired on the first anniversary of the tragedy, Fred Rogers was diagnosed with stomach cancer.

Unwilling to cancel commitments he’d made to appear in public over the holidays, Fred put off surgery until January 2003. By then, it was too late. Doctors removed his entire stomach, but the cancer had already spread.

“He was just so exhausted,” Joanne recalled of the days and weeks following the surgery. “And he said, ‘I hope they don’t think I’m being elitist to not have [friends] visiting’; and he cried when he said that because he didn’t want to hurt their feelings.”

He tried to write emails to the many people he loved but often fell asleep before he could finish the task. Despite his frustrations and exhaustion, he did manage to reach out to a few close friends.

“He told me that he was sick,” recalled Yo-Yo Ma, the famous cellist and personal friend to Fred. “I played a Bach Sarabande for him over the phone.”⁶⁸

Fred used the little energy he had left to arrange for handpicked personal belongings to be mailed to particular friends and family after his death. The gifts would have to say what he could not.

Joanne, heartbroken by her husband’s pain and her own impending loss, did her best to ease his worries. “Fred,” she said, sitting on the bed beside him, “I know the boys are going to be okay. I’ll try to be.”

“Oh, Joanne, you don’t know what a relief that is for me to hear that,” he replied.⁶⁹

Just a few weeks after his surgery, on February 27, 2003, he was gone.

At the funeral, Reverend Bill Barker—the friend who had stood up for Fred in front of the Presbytery board so many years before—stood up for him once more, this time to give the eulogy in front of the more than 2,700 attendees.

Fred was laid to rest in his beloved “clergy tie,” a fitting reminder of his life’s work and calling. As a member of the “royal priesthood,” Fred had worked wholeheartedly to restore creation, one small act of kindness at a time, in his own little neighborhood (1 Peter 2:9).

In the end, it wasn’t the awards he won or the number of viewers he reached that made his life extraordinary. It was the everyday ways in which he loved.

“He was one of the most authentic and Christlike people that I have ever known in my life,” said one colleague. “Everyone you talk to that had any encounter with him: It was a real moment in their lives.”⁷⁰

“What most people couldn’t see in Fred was his enormous power. Power. Capital P,” said another. “Fred is the most powerful person I have ever known in my whole life... His power derived from a really unique place. It was his absolute self-possession, which is very different from self-interest or self-satisfaction, or selfishness. He didn’t need anything from you or from me.”⁷¹

Free of the need to take, Fred was able to give—a listening ear, a warm smile—but most of all, an invitation to be loved.

As Fred himself put it, “‘Won’t You Be My Neighbor?’ [is] an invitation for somebody to be close to you. I think everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is lovable. And consequently, the greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they’re loved and capable of loving.”⁷²

That is the work of the everyday priest—and as Fred’s life shows, it’s the very work that can change someone’s life forever.

THREE WAYS TO GLORIFY GOD IN YOUR WORK AS SEEN IN THE LIFE OF FRED ROGERS

(Jordan) don't think I've ever heard of a more Jesus-like person than Fred Rogers. He was as one biographer put it, "Mother Teresa in a cardigan."⁷³ But if Rogers were here today, I'm confident he would remind us of two things. First, Jesus—not Fred—is the hero of this story. Second, the same Holy Spirit that empowered Rogers's extraordinary life now lives in you and me. So, we modern mere Christians can glorify God through our work in much the same way as Rogers did. How?

I. MERE CHRISTIANS GLORIFY GOD BY EMBRACING THEIR POSITION IN GOD'S "ROYAL PRIESTHOOD."

Before Christ, priests and Pharisees had a lock on which vocations did "the work of the Lord." But when Jesus, the Great High Priest, came to earth, he spent the vast majority of his life working not as a religious professional but as a mere carpenter.

That truth helps us understand what the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:9 when he claimed that every follower of Christ is now a member of God's "royal priesthood." It's no longer just literal priests who represent God in the world and serve as conduits for his goodness. It's every carpenter, entrepreneur, and barista—*any* Christian doing genuinely good work.

How can that be true? Because God is now in each and every Christian through the power of his Holy Spirit. So, to quote the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, for the believer, "nothing is secular—everything is sacred," including your work as a mere Christian.⁷⁴

Nobody embraced their position in God's royal priesthood more enthusiastically than Fred Rogers, who believed he could do God's work from behind

a pulpit *or* a puppet—a conviction he literally took to his grave in the form of his “clergy tie.”

But Fred wasn’t just encouraged by the sacred label of his seemingly “secular” work. He glorified God by allowing that truth to shape his vocation. He worked hard at the “good works, which God prepared in advance” for him to do (Ephesians 2:10), even though, given his family’s considerable wealth, he never had to work a day in his life. He used his platform to tell artistic parables of the kingdom of God. And he worked to be a priestly “repairer of creation,” redeeming what he saw was broken in the medium of television.

Fred said that “deep within each of us is a spark of the divine just waiting to be used to light up a dark place.”⁷⁵ That is true of you, believer. Like Fred Rogers, you can glorify God in the “dark place” you work by embracing your position in the “royal priesthood” and viewing your job as a primary place God has called you to “let your light shine before others” (Matthew 5:16).

Take a moment right now to thank God for drafting you into the “royal priesthood,” and ask him to show you how specifically he is calling you to more faithfully represent him in your workplace.

2. MERE CHRISTIANS GLORIFY GOD BY MAKING TIME TO EXPERIENCE THEIR BELOVEDNESS.

Fred Rogers lived a *wildly* productive life. Over the course of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’s* thirty-one seasons, Fred personally wrote nine hundred scripts, two hundred songs, and thirteen operas. Even more impressive was how much time he spent personally showing compassion to thousands of hurting people off camera.

But here’s what’s most remarkable about Fred’s productivity: He accomplished more than most people ever dream *while also* spending more time with his heavenly Father than most people ever dare.

He began each morning in silent prayer. At lunch, he would slip away to the quiet of his office to meditate. Upon arriving home from the studio, he would often spend another hour napping or praying before dinner.

As one of his friends put it, Fred “fiercely guarded his time of quiet and reflection.”⁷⁶ And in this, he reflected his Savior who “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16).

Like Jesus, Fred wasn’t interested in silence for the sake of silence. “It wasn’t

just the absence of noise he advocated,” said a close friend of Fred’s, “but silence that reflects on the goodness of God.”⁷⁷

In other words, the spiritual discipline of solitude was a means to an end for Fred Rogers: regularly experiencing the extraordinary love God had for him. A sign in Fred’s office explicitly reminded him of that love. It was a Hebrew printing of Song of Songs 2:16: “My beloved is mine and I am his.”

It is precisely because Fred spent so much time quietly reflecting on his status as a “beloved” child of God that he was able to share love so freely with God’s other children. “He didn’t need anything from you or from me,” reflected one of his coworkers.⁷⁸ Because his sense of belovedness led him to “the freedom of self-forgetfulness.”⁷⁹

The same can be true for you and me, believer. Like Fred, we will glorify God by making the time to abide in him and experience the belovedness that frees us to fully love our neighbors as ourselves (see John 15:1-8).

That could look like recommitting yourself to a morning “quiet time” before work, setting reminders to meditate on God’s love throughout your day, or hanging a visual reminder of God’s love in your office. Whatever works for you, works. But abide we must if we long to glorify God more fully in our work.

3. MERE CHRISTIANS GLORIFY GOD BY WORKING AT A PACE THAT ALLOWS THEM TO EXTEND GOD’S LOVE TO OTHERS.

It wasn’t just a sense of belovedness that led Fred to demonstrate otherworldly kindness to others. It was also his extraordinary lack of hurry.

When Fred’s biographer, Max King, was asked to sum up the message of Fred’s life in a single phrase, he said, “Slow down, be kind.” To Fred, those things were “directly related.”⁸⁰ Because he understood that you and I must “slow down” *in order to* “be kind” and show God’s love to those we work with. Which is why Fred urged anyone who would listen to put their “dominant energies into developing a sane design for living.”⁸¹

Here again, Jesus served as the perfect model for Fred. As pastor John Mark Comer has pointed out, “If there’s anything you pick up from reading the four Gospels, it’s that Jesus was rarely in a hurry.”⁸² Even when a child’s life hung in the balance, Jesus moved at a pace that allowed him to attend to the suffering of one daughter on his way to heal another (see Mark 5:21-43).

You and I will glorify God when we model Jesus's lack of hurry so that we can extend God's love to those we work with. And Fred Rogers shows us how to do that in a more modern context.

First, *budget tons of margin into your calendar*. If you think it's going to take thirty minutes to get to a meeting, budget forty-five. It is exactly this kind of margin that allowed Fred to see and engage with the pain in his coworkers' lives, like the time he pressed the stop button in the elevator to bless a fellow producer.

Second, *resolve to be with who you're with*. Not only did Fred not hurry, but also, when someone entered his presence, he offered *them* the gift of feeling unhurried. There was no checking his watch. No glancing at mail on his desk. When Fred was with someone, regular time stood still, "Fred time" began, and "urgency seemed to dissipate," as Fred made the other person feel like the image-bearer of God they were.⁸³ You can do the same today by silencing distractions and resolving to be fully present with who you're with.

Finally, *when you fail to be unhurried, choose the important over the urgent*. Fred became more human to me when I heard his son say that there were days when Fred "was rushing home from work, in order to sit down with [his family] for dinner."⁸⁴ As his biographer explains, even when Fred failed to have enough margin in his calendar, he "never—ever—let the urgency of work or life impede his focus on what he saw as basic human values: integrity, respect, responsibility...and of course...kindness."⁸⁵ God will be glorified when the same is said of you and me.

**Want to share Fred Rogers's story with a friend?
Send them a free copy of this section of the book at
JordanRaynor.com/free.**